Home turf

At the Connecting Civil Society of Asia and Europe conference in Barcelona last month, Lê Hường spoke with Spanish Ambassador Delfín Colomé, Executive Director of Asia Europe Foundation (ASEF).

Asia, Europe building cultural bridges

ASEF was created in 1997 by heads of state at the Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) to promote better understanding between the peoples of the two continents. ASEM's three core programmes focus on intellectual, cultural and people-to-people exchanges.

How has dialogue progressed within ASEM during the past eight years?

It has been very positive dialogue - we have created a treasured relationship between Asia and Europe - not only between governments but also with the civil societies of our 26 members.

At the beginning, it was initiated as a political experiment. I think we have moved beyond this political focus. It is something that affecting the citizens of the countries. The dialogue has to be kept at any price.

What aspects do you think should be further improved?

I am happy with what has been achieved, but we can do much more. If, for example, ASEF gets financial support, we could deal with double the problems. We still have not established scholarships for Asian and European students because this requires a lot of money.

Leaders have to be quite aware that dialogue is not something abstract, but something very precise and concrete, which requires money for solving problems. We cannot improvise in abstract, thus financial support is very important.

What’s the importance of ASEM 5 to be held in Hà Nội this October?

When I met the Vietnamese Prime Minister last month in Hà Nội, he told me that ‘5’ is a very good number in Asian tradition - ‘1’ is birth, ‘2’ is youth, ‘3’ is maturity, ‘4’ is death, ‘5’ represents renewal.

I think this is a positive sign that we should keep in mind for the fifth ASEM. We are going to see a new situation in regard to possible new members and must rethink ASEM’s focus - I count on the aura of ‘5’ to prepare for October’s meet.

What are the key topics for the upcoming meeting?

Enlargement will be the key topic. There are some problems with different perceptions in Europe and Asia about enlargement, especially about the situation in Myanmar. But I’m absolutely optimistic, I know that 26 members cannot throw away all the achievements of the past eight years building the dialogue between Asia and Europe - this would be a crazy thing. The leaders were very wise to create ASEM, they would be wise to maintain it.

What about Viet Nam’s role in this meeting?

You are the host country, you put all your efforts, all your imagination and I know you have a big capacity for participation.

I love Việt Nam this way. I can’t say Việt Nam is my favourite, as I have 26 members in my jurisdiction, so I can’t have predilections.

I admire the great capacity of Việt Nam to develop to be imaginative and creative. The country’s human resources are really great and I am absolutely convinced that with hospitality and hard work, ASEM will be a success.

What has ASEF done to support preparations in Hà Nội?

We are publishing a programme to create good atmosphere for people involved in ASEM. We are holding a young leaders’ symposium [last week] in Hà Nội. We have cultural activities. We have some problems, but we have set aside US$225,000 for solving these, and we have the help of a lot of Vietnamese institutions to do that.

What is the importance of the civil relationship between Asia and Europe?

It’s very important because we don’t only need governments and big institutions, we need citizens. We must enhance relations between peoples. Europeans should better understand people in Asia and vice versa. This seems to be easy, but it requires a lot of effort, funds and problem solving. VNS